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CHAUCEER'S "OPIE OF THEBES FYN"

Chaucer's considerable knowledge of medical matters is well known. Witness his description of the Doctor of Physic in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*; the diagnosis of Arcite's condition after his fall from his horse in the *Knight's Tale* (A. 2743 f.); the specific mention of "signes of empoisoning" in the *Pardoner's Tale* (C. 889 f.); the "povre widwes" freedom from disease and the reason therefor in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* (B. 4026 f.); the fuller discourse of Pertelote on the probable cause of Chauntecleer's bad dreams; and the still more elaborate description of remedies (B. 4111-57). More recently we have learned from Professor Lowes¹ that, in attributing to Palamon the "loveres maladye Of Hereos" (A. 1373-74), Chaucer was wiser in mediaeval medicine than his commentators for many a day.

Let me call attention to two instances, not adequately explained, in which Chaucer has introduced specific references to mediaeval medicines where there were no such references in his originals. In the tale of Hypermnestra (*Legend of Good Women*, 2668-70) Chaucer makes "Egestes" tell his daughter of the draught he gives her for her husband:

Yif him to drinke whan he goth to reste,
And he shal slepe as longe as ever thee leste,
The nercotiks and opies been so stronge.

For this specific mention of narcotics and opium Ovid² has only the most general allusion to a soporific in

Quaeque tibi dederam vina, soporis erant.

In the second instance Chaucer's use of narcotics and opium is even more a departure from the original. Boccaccio in the *Teseide* has Palamon escape from prison by changing clothes with his

¹ *Mod. Phil.*, XI, 491.

² *Heroides* xiv. 42.

physician Alimeto. Chaucer makes the escape depend upon a wholly different circumstance (*Kt. T.*, 612-16):

For he had yive his gayler drinke so
Of a clarree maad of a certeyn wyn,
With nercotikes and opie of Thebes fyn,
That al that night, thogh that men wolde him shake,
The gayler sleep, he mighte nat awake.¹

Palamon himself had drugged the "gayler" with the finest opium in the world, "opie of Thebes," of which no adequate account has been given by Chaucer commentators.²

I have neither time nor mediaeval medical books sufficient to follow out minutely the sources of Chaucer's knowledge of Thebaic opium and narcotics, but some hints may be given. Thus the ancients knew two forms of opium, one a decoction of the whole poppy plant called meconium (Gk. *μηκόνειον*), as by Theophrastus (b. about 372 B.C.), the first botanist. The other was opium proper (Gk. *ὀπός, ὀπιον*) from the seed pod only, discussed by Dioscorides of Anazarba (ca. 77 A.D.), who wrote the most important work of the ancients on medicinal plants. Both these forms of opium continued to be known and used through the middle ages, and both are mentioned, for example, by Simon A Cordo (Januensis), who died some ten years before Chaucer was born. Chaucer's plural "opies" of the *Legend of Good Women* may therefore have been based on his knowledge of the two kinds of opium³ known in his time and long before. This at any rate seems probable, although it is possible he merely refers to opium as grown in different localities. Thus the commercial opium of the middle ages to the twelfth century is said to have come from Asia Minor.

¹ In the original (*Teseide*, V, st. 24) mention is made of wine which Panphilo had brought in, and he and the guard drink until they are *mezzo affatappiato*. Yet the wine is not said to be drugged, and plays a less essential part in Palamon's escape.

² Professor Skeat notes the occurrence of *Opium Thebaicum* in the margin of the Ellesmere and Harleian MSS. Beyond this he mentions merely that the term is found in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Others have ineffective notes.

³ The word meconium has almost a place in Old English. In the *Leechdoms*, I, 156, a remedy for sore eyes mentions the "popig . . . be Grecas mæcorias and Romane papaver album nemnab and Engle hwit popig hataþ." The word *mæcorias*, though not hitherto explained, I believe, must be a modification of Greek *μηκόνειον*, or of Latin *meconium*, probably in the plural form. I conjecture also that the OE. word had *æ*, or *e* for *æ*, corresponding to Greek *η*, to which we have something like a parallel in Orm's use in early Middle English. The final *s* is paralleled by that in *lactucas* for *lactuca*, 'lettuce,' in *Leechdoms*, II, 212, 12.

Thebaic opium requires a further note. Pliny in his *Natural History* refers the cultivation of opium to Asia Minor only. But a commentator on Pliny, Bk. XX, cap. 76 (*Excursus de Opio* in the edition of the *Bibl. Clas. Latina*) gives the significant statement:

Arabes et officinae Thebaicum, seu quod in Egypto circa Thebas colligetur, opium prae caeteris commendarunt.

One of the most important of these Arabian physicians, the learned botanist and traveler Ibn Baithar (d. 1248), had this to say of opium and its origin in Egypt. I quote from L. Leclerc's French version:

Il n'est réellement connu ni en Orient ni en Occident, mais seulement en Egypte et particulièrement dans le Saïd, au lieu appelé Boutidj [the name in Arabic follows]. C'est de là qu'il provient et qu'on l'expédie dans toutes les autres contrées.

Simon A Cordo of Genoa (Januensis), who traveled widely to acquire knowledge of medicinal plants in their native haunts, is very explicit regarding opium Thebaicum in his *Clavis Sanationis*. As will be seen he also distinguishes meconium:

Opium ab opos que est lacrimus nomen extrahit. Opium verum que est melius fit scissis leviter capitellis papaverum nigrorum adhuc verentium terre ita ne scissura interiora penetret iteri ora et lac que egreditur collectum in vasculis desiccatur tale tebaicum vacatur. Sed quando capita ipsa cui suis foliis contunduntur exprimiturque succus atque siccatur sit aliud opiumque miconis dicitur que patet per dia. ca. de miconio que est papaver.¹

Let me add a modern confirmation of Chaucer from *An Inquiry into the Nature and Properties of Opium* by Dr. Samuel Crumpe, London, 1793, p. 12:

Egypt, and especially the country about Thebes, was long famous for the quantity and excellence of its Opium, and hence the term Thebaic still given to some of its preparations.

The term Thebaic, by the way, is still preserved in Thebaine, one of the opium alkaloids discovered by Thiboumery in 1835.

Of the narcotics Chaucer mentions both times in connection with opium, he gives us no hint. But by the fourteenth century

¹ From the Venice edition of 1486, which is without pagination. His fuller statement regarding meconium need not concern us here. The transcript was made for me at the Surgeon General's Library in Washington.

numerous narcotics were known, with no such distinction of any one as in the case of Thebaic opium. Thus Bernard Gordon, the Bernard of Chaucer's Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* (l. 434), who wrote his *Practica seu Lilium Medicinæ* in 1307, under the caption *De stupifacientibus, somnum provocantibus, et de iis quæ vomitum provocat*, has lists for internal and for external application. The former are:

Mitiora Sq. violaceus, syrupus de papavera; succi: lactucae, semper-vini, solatri, portulacae, cicutae; conserva: violarum, nymphaeae.

For external use he mentions:

Oleum violacium, oleum mandragoris, unguentem populconis, decoctum corticis mandrago., semen hyoscyami, lac muliebre, semen papaveris, decoctum salicis, opium, anethum viride in oleo coctum.¹

These, then, or some of them, we may assume to have been in Chaucer's mind when he added to his originals the explicit references to narcotics.

To return to Palamon's escape. It is not necessary for me to account for Palamon's manner of obtaining the drugs he used so effectively, though modern realism would certainly have done so more fully than by incidental allusion to the "helping of a freend" (*Kt. T.*, A. 1468). I suggest, however, that if Chaucer knew as much about the "loveres maladye of hereos" as our modern scholars, he must have known that "nercotiks" and even "opie of Thebes fyn" were a proper remedy for love-melancholy. They should therefore have been on the dressing table of an aristocratic prisoner afflicted so grievously as Palamon—and surely I need not account for the dressing table in a prince's prison chamber. Some new fury of jealousy against the more fortunate Arcite was all that was necessary to suggest the new use of the drugs. Compared, too, with Boccaccio's labored introduction of a physician who would risk death by impersonating Palamon, this is only another evidence of Chaucer's cleverness. Of course the sympathetic "freend" may have persuaded the jailor that Palamon's case of "hereos" required the remedies.

Professor Skeat did not make full use of the reference to opium Thebaicum in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. It proves to be

¹ *Lilium Medicinæ*, ed. of 1550, p. 915.

aptly in point however. Skeat refers it to Part III, Sec. ii, Mem. vi, Subsec. ii, without note of the edition he used. After some search I find it in Shilleto's edition, Part III, Sec. ii, Mem. v, Subsec. i, the very place it should be to support my conjecture. The whole "Member" is on *Cure of Love-Melancholy*, the "Heroical or Love-Melancholy" of Part III, Sec. i, Mem. i, Subsec. i, corresponding to Chaucer's "hereos" as Professor Lowes showed. The subsection in which the reference to Thebaic opium appears just at the close is devoted to the *Cure of Love-Melancholy by Labour, Diet, Physick, Fasting, &c.* The particular passage may as well be left in the Latin of Burton, but to make its aptness doubly sure it also mentions various narcotics, as Hyoseyamus (henbane), cicuta (hemlock), lactuca (lettuce), protulaca (purslane), all mentioned by Bernard Gordon quoted above. For the cure of love-melancholy these were to be used in external application. Hence the "clarree" which Palamon mixed for the unsuspecting jailor.

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